

On the Side With Silas

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AFTER all, one of the best points about real life is that every now and then the schedule goes on the blink and things happen foolish and unexpected. Such as this batty affair I got mixed up in, the other noon.

I'd been around to my fav'rite chop-house for lunch—just a triffin' little snack consistin' of a slab of shad roe decorated with strips of crisp bacon and a spray of water-cress, a fat baked potato snuggled up against it, with a hunk of rhubarb pie as a chaser. And, if you're askin' me, that's about as fine as they come, no matter who you are. I remarked as much to Fritz as I shoved over the tip, and he agreed with me cordial. Yes; with such paltry nourishment as that, I felt I could struggle through until dinner-time without goin' faint.

Maybe that's why Forty-second Street looked so calm and peaceful as I drifted back to the Physical Culture Studio. As a matter of fact, I expect it wasn't anything of the kind, for the cross-town traffic was snarled up, a gang of wreckers was tearin' the front off a five-story buildin' in the middle of the block, pavin' contractors had a cement-mixer goin' a little further on, and the one o'clock rush back to the offices was in full swing. But I was serene and contented, especially under my belt, and I didn't notice anything but the sunshine.

A few doors from the Studio entrance I stopped to rubber in at a show window. Nothing but the same old display of electric irons and toasters that I've passed every day for months; but I hung up and gawped at it interested. If they'd had an outside barker they might have sold me 'most anything.

Then, all of a sudden, I looks up and sees this young mob surgin' down on me from Sixth Avenue way. Seemed to have oozed up through the sidewalk gratin's or

been dropped off the roofs. I'd take oath there wasn't anything of the kind in sight a minute before.

But here was a bunch of men and boys swarmin' around, wavin' their arms, pushin', kickin', diggin' in with their elbows, and shoutin' frantic. It's a crazy-actin', wild-eyed, pantin' crowd, that sways and swings and revolves on itself, but all the time surges along, sweepin' the ordinary foot traffic one side, brushin' people into the gutters and doorways, like a thunder-storm scatterin' a Sunday-school picnic.

FIRST off I couldn't make anything out of it at all; but finally I spots this short-legged old gent in the gray suit and gray felt hat who seems to be leadin' the bunch. That is, he was in front, but walkin' backwards and sort of pushin' away them that was nearest to him.

A rummy-lookin' crowd it is, with hardly a clean shave or a fresh collar in the lot; but they all seemed greatly worked up over something or other.

"Hey, old sport!" a tall, lanky gink was shoutin'. "I didn't git one. You skipped me." "Gimme one, gimme one, mister!" yells another; and so on, until you could hardly hear yourself think.

And, the first thing I knew, the old gent has backed square into me, so solid I had to grab him by the shoulders to keep both of us from goin' down; and the next minute we're surrounded with dirty paws stretched out at us from all sides and clawin' our coat sleeves promiscuous.

As the old boy turns to see who's sharin' the center of the stage with him, I gets a better look; and, while he's a perfect stranger, there's something about his face—maybe that mildly worried look in his gray blue eyes—that I kind of liked. Anyway, I decides offhand that I'm shinnin' on his side.

"Want any help?" says I.

"Thank you," says he; "I—I would like to get out of this, if I can."

"Then stick close to me and drift along a few doors," says I. "That's it! Let 'em push. Here we are. Now! Duck behind and into this hallway. In you go!"

There's a grand howl too, when the old chap slips into the entrance to the Studio and the mob finds me blockin' the door. They don't hold any caucus or council of war, but proceeds to try rushin' me off my feet. But say, I ain't fond of actin' as door-mat in a place where I'm payin' rent. Not while my elbows are free. The next I knew, some of the leaders was wabblin' groggy on their hands and knees in front of the doorway, and the general ambition to walk over me sort of slackens.

"Sorry to mess up any of you enterprisin' hobos," says I, "but you shouldn't crowd in so enthusiastic. Now, I move you that this mass meetin' adjourn."

"Ah, send out the old geezer!" shouts some one from the far edge of the bunch. "Where's the old guy with the dollar bills?"

"Come in closer and you'll get the answer to that," says I. "Just push up within arm's length. Ah, come along!"

Maybe I wasn't cordial enough. Anyway, nobody seemed anxious to get in range, and when I steps out on the sidewalk to see if there ain't a cop within hail they scuttles off like so many rats.

IN the hallway I finds the old boy leanin' sort of limp against the wall, with one hand to his side.

"Hello!" says I. "Feelin' a bit fluttery after the excitement?"

"It—it's nothing," says he. "My—my heart, you know. Pounding a little."

"Better come up to the Studio until it slows down," says I. "Here; lemme

steady you. That's it. Easy does it."

While he's sippin' a glass of water and gettin' his blood pump regulated, I sizes him up curious. First off, I had him placed in the prosperous jay class—maybe a country banker, or owner of the big shingle works or a string of brick-yards. But somehow that don't fit, exactly. For one thing, there's too deep a tan on his neck and the lower half of his face—the sort of color you find on these old boys who spend their winters on Southern golf courses. Then I spots the custom-made shoes and the manicured finger-nails, and I know he must be a plute of some kind.

MEANWHILE he's been gazin' around, them calm, steady eyes of his travelin' from the pictures on the wall to the letter-in' on the office door.

"Yes," says I. "That's me—Professor McCabe."

"Shorty, eh?" says he. "I remember now. I used to follow ring events when I wasn't too busy. I was in St. Louis the night you won the belt."

"Well, well!" says I. "Then we're—most acquainted."

"I'm Silas Rapp," says he, "of Rapp & Baker."

"Oh!" says I. "Rapp & Baker ranges, found in a million homes?"

He chuckles easy and nods. "They were good ranges when we made 'em," says he. "I can't say as much for the ones the trust is turning out to-day—fancier, maybe, with more nickel and frills. But we tried to make a stove that would cook things and last a life-time—not a kitchen ornament. I suppose I shouldn't find fault, though."

"Your dividends jumping every year, eh?" I suggests.

"It's scandalous, the money we're making," he says. "We don't know how to spend it. Look at Baker—with a Scotch castle! Bore him to death, you know. I'm not much better, though."

"Your fad is distributin' dollar bills to the multitude and gettin' yourself mobbed, is it?" says I.

Silas drops his chin sheepish.

"I don't quite understand yet how it happened," says he. "I've always felt sorry for those poor fellows on the park benches. To-day I took a sudden notion to help them. It seemed easy enough. I got a lot of ones from the bank, and went at it. Thought I was doing the job very quietly, too. Why, some of them were sound asleep when I tucked the folded bills into their hands, and—"

"For the love of Pete!" says I. "Is that the way you did it? No wonder you stirred up the panhandlers. Why, don't you know you can block Broadway just by startin' to distribute samples of tooth paste or chewing gum? But openin' up a free kale dispensary in Bryant Park! Say, Mr. Rapp, you don't look as nutty as that. Perfectly sober too, I judge?"

That brings an uneasy squirm out of Silas, and he tints up some under the eyes.

"Then," says he, smilin' sarcastic, "a man who tries in his own way to help others is either drunk or insane, is he? It—it's a queer world."

"Now you've said a mouthful," says I. "Queer's the word. And the funny thing is that so few of us suspicion we're doin' our part to make it so. You and me, for instance."

If he'd been one of these chesty, touchy plutes that expects you to cross yourself every time they tap their cheek-books, our little confab would have ended right there, and likely as not he'd have gone out luggin' a grouch. I'd been willin', too.

But Silas Rapp ain't that kind. He's jolted, I can see. After a second, though, he gets a grip on himself and shoots over